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# THE 'DYING-TALE' AS EPISTEMIC STRATEGY IN HEMANS'S *RECORDS OF WOMAN*

Angela Aliff



THE POPULAR PARTICIPATORY HISTORIES written by female Romantics resist New Historical contextualisation in organisation, content and intentionality. Elisa Beshero-Bondar observes the increasingly scholarly awareness of this resistance, pointing out that James Chandler and Jerome Christensen 'have each proposed that Romanticism be dislodged from reductive chronological parameters as well as contextual approaches that limit engagement with the way literary texts formulate perspectives on history'.<sup>1</sup> Felicia Hemans's *Records of Woman* (1828) invites this shift with its achronological contents as well as her extensive personal involvement with her characters. Beshero-Bondar continues: 'Such methods limit discussion of literature to matters narrowly relevant in theoretical paradigms of our time, and avoid engaging with how texts determine, assert, or examine epistemologies of history and culture on their own terms'.<sup>2</sup> The standard practice of current scholarship in framing analysis with historical context sometimes overlooks the increasingly absent contextualisation in the anthologies of women's writing published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These anthologies varied in their historical and contemporary selections, resulting in a sense that women's writing was valued by situating it within the socio-political context of the female writers and their audiences.

In *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993), Margaret Ezell offers a broad view of the changes in approach to female anthologies, beginning with seventeenth-century collections of poetry with 'a strong tradition of beginning with a section of commendatory verse by other writers, particularly in posthumous editions', and resulting in an organisational structure that produces 'a specific environment for reading the verse. After having read about the verse and its author, the reader then encounters it with certain expectations, predisposed to like, admire, and perhaps even emulate the contents'.<sup>3</sup> Notably, these introductions are less concerned with clarifying historical detail than establishing a moral context for the reception of the contents. During the time of Hemans's prolific literary career, the work of past female writers remained relatively accessible when compared to the aftermath of the Victorian solidification of the female canon. Yet, this accessibility was detached from chronological detail by the popular practice of excerpting. Ezell writes:

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, the *Ladies Magazine* occasionally used Restoration and early eighteenth-century women's writings as filler material. However, since the magazine did not

date the poems, the reader would have already had to be familiar with Catherine Cockburn, Mary, Lady Chudleigh, Mrs. Lennox, and 'Ardelia' in order to appreciate such pieces as early specimens of women's writing.<sup>4</sup>

As Ezell explains, selections in anthologies of women's writing did not become truly canonised until the 1860s, a generation after Hemans's death. As the editorial focus narrowed, so did access to the array of female writers that had existed before and during Hemans's career.

The canonical success of the elected female writers in late nineteenth-century anthologies existed alongside the increasingly popular framing of female writing with expositions of the merits of their 'feminine' qualities.<sup>5</sup> Hemans herself satisfied the complex expectations of an audience that described her poetry as '*intensely* feminine' while maintaining her status as an immensely popular poet. Representing the opinion of her contemporaries, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* proclaimed that, 'as a female writer, influencing the female mind, [Hemans] has undoubtedly stood, for some by-past years, the very first in rank'.<sup>6</sup> Hemans's poetry undoubtedly develops a female didacticism, but whether she intended to encourage women to embrace domestic stereotypes or circumvented those stereotypes to educate women regarding their innate power is a complex interpretive problem, one that both an awareness and application of 'affective historiography' can answer.

The emotional awareness of affective historiography, which acknowledges the complex and varied avenues for emotional transference, sometimes requires the suspension of temporality, or at least that temporality be temporarily deprioritised. To Greg Kucich, this approach is expansive and apparent in

a central strategy in broader patterns of women's historical revisionism in the Romantic era of deepening the sympathetic registers developing in later eighteenth-century historiography. This more affective view of the past, emerging throughout a wide range of experimental histories by women writers, helped to shape a new historical consciousness more open to the social wrongs of the past and more committed to righting their persistence in the present.<sup>7</sup>

This emotional and moral consciousness appears throughout Hemans's Records and reflects the kind of historical consciousness that Megan Matchinske advocates in her scholarship on Early Modern women. In finding commonalities between the affective historiography of the Romantics and Matchinske's ethics of action, I will demonstrate how Early Modern women's affective and constructive histories can illuminate the study of their female successors. As Matchinske writes, 'margins/limits are fleetingly discursive, both of the moment and for the moment, and that history—Herod's, mine, yours—is local, immediate, particular and, always and necessarily, revisable'.<sup>8</sup> This theoretical collapsing is surprisingly and productively reflective of Romantic women's treatment of the past.

Matchinske's allusion to Herod follows her analysis of a small portion of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* (1613). Act v begins with Nuntio's brief soliloquy expressing his dread at having been chosen

to communicate the news of Mariam's death to Herod. After Nuntio's initial greeting, Herod, who had ordered Mariam's execution and should subsequently already know her fate, begs Nuntio with great emotion, 'I prithee tell no dying-tale: thine eye | Without thy tongue doth tell but too too much'.<sup>9</sup> Despite Herod's request, both he and Nuntio recognise the necessity that the details of Mariam's death be formally relayed, and Nuntio proceeds to articulate Mariam's final words and demeanour. Matchinske uses this scene to illustrate Cary's deliberate positioning of history:

[the dying-tale] gives to history a meaning, a rationality, an episteme [...] the history that it generates is not really about Mariam. Instead, the 'dying-tale' inscribes a relationship—a relationship between two distinct and very much alive participants: the king and the messenger. The 'dying-tale' delineates for Herod a way of assessing his own behavior; it announces to him, after the fact, the consequences of his actions towards Mariam; it makes him responsible, and it promotes tragic remorse.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the information Nuntio communicates regarding Mariam's death carries significance as a preservation of the truth of the situation. However, as Matchinske implies, Nuntio's narrative exists not for the reader, but for Herod. And Herod, whose actions determined Mariam's fate, requests Nuntio's information not because he lacks knowledge, but because the formality of his active hearing will ultimately drive the narrative forward by requiring 'its most immediate listener Herod to re-act', and, by implication, require action from the audience.<sup>11</sup> This action, as Matchinske discusses, is provoked by Cary's reshaping of historical information to interrogate the 'masculinist, state-centered perspective outlined in previous Herod histories',<sup>12</sup> and provoke the rethinking of the role of gender and the dynamics of power. Because Matchinske's work ultimately illustrates the process of recovering the ethical motivation for female appropriations of history, her insights can be usefully applied to other moments in female literary history.

The implications of the dying-tale share some epistemic characteristics with Hemans's *Records of Woman*: the historic-didactic value of both works occurs relationally rather than via straightforward communication of objective truth. Just as Herod already knows the fate of Mariam before Nuntio relays the details, Hemans's audience, in a sense, knows the fate of most of the women in *Records*. The hopeful anticipation of 'youth and love' nearly always ends in separation and death, if not of the women themselves, then at least of their lovers. And because Hemans typically prefaces the poems with anecdotal historical annotations, she allows the audience to assume the worst before engaging in the poems themselves. Hemans did not write the *Records* to reveal factual historical details; instead, as in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, the *Records* develop a relationship between the teller of the dying-tale (Hemans) and her audience who already know what will occur in the poetic narratives. As Matchinske argues, Nuntio, '[t]hanks to his special talents, his credentials, [...] is to be trusted in shaping the "dying-tale"—in arranging its didactic legacy'.<sup>13</sup> Hemans entrusts to her poeticism the responsibility

of shaping the didactic legacy of the *Records of Woman* by positioning herself in direct relation to her audience and using her art as a conduit of meaningful history.

To an extent, this relational positioning goes beyond the ekphrasis that Brian P. Elliott describes: 'Like elegy, her ekphrasis becomes a song of individual loss, a lament for the inevitable dissolution of identity in the sands of time; every figure becomes a broken statue in the desert of history.'<sup>14</sup> Unlike Cary's dying-tale, the lament more exclusively looks backward at history by emphasising its shortcomings. To prevent representing Hemans as completely despairing, though, Elliott reads her ekphrastic poetry as purposeful through 'a paradoxical collapse of distance', or in Kathleen Lundeen's phrase, 'negative incapability'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, Hemans preserves history by imbuing static or dead factual details with living emotional elements of herself. Elliott illustrates this practice by suggesting a parallel between Properzia Rossi's projection of herself onto Ariadne and Hemans's projection of herself onto Rossi, an idea strengthened biographically by Hemans's difficult marriage.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, this projection, or the 'investments of the speaker into the ekphrastic object' preserves the past greatness of history's heroines. Although Elliott's description of the ekphrastic process differentiates Hemans's highly personal project from the work of Keats and Shelley to recognise and define Hemans's poetic achievement, I question how much Hemans could accomplish through an appropriation of history limited solely to the preservation of her private feelings. If the *Records* are solely laments or songs of loss, they can accomplish little to make history—at least the useful kind of history that Matchinske describes as 'a priori possibility (its ethical imperative, its intentionality, its ability to construct ends and to legitimate them in that process)'.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Matchinske's work on Early Modern women's epistemic approaches to history offers to the study of Hemans an emphasis on the personal and dynamic relationship between poet and audience motivated by the 'ethics of action' produced affectively.

If, as a reading incorporating Matchinske might suggest, Hemans writes her poetry compelled by ethics that demand action, a difficult question emerges regarding what specifically Hemans feels needs to change. Michael T. Williamson does position Hemans in relation to her audience, specifically through her invitation for readers to witness the elegy as an anticonsolatory social drama of contamination and purification in which the mourner, not the mourned, must be cleansed after an immersion in death and grief that gives rise to utterances and gestures that are entirely contrary to ideals of composed, resolute, faithful 'feminine' mourning.<sup>18</sup>

Williamson's reading of *Records of Woman* reveals a tension between the 'idealisation' of women and their ability, while in mourning, to meet its demands; their attempts to meet these demands result in their contamination and subsequent need for purification. In Williamson's words, Hemans uses this social impasse for women 'because she so insistently argues against women's cultural, political, and social power to effect the transformation of dead men into stable memorialized figures'.<sup>19</sup> This idea provides us with a profitable way of understanding Hemans as more than a popular, sentimental poet; instead, she confronts the notion that soci-

ety's women function emotionally to preserve a honourable patriarchal legacy—a legacy that Hemans implies is already unstable, impermanent and degenerative.

Although useful, this reading limits Hemans's philosophical critique of society to negative definition; in other words, she expresses what cannot and should not be without offering a positive solution regarding what ought to be to her readership. Instead, I argue that Hemans, as Early Modern female historians before her, shaped history according to an ethics that demands action. This is not to say that Hemans's demands a literal emulation of action, however. The women in *Records* handle disaster in ways that are often uncomfortable if not deadly, and their external circumstances are overwhelmingly undesirable. Yet Hemans's heroines demonstrate inner qualities such as loyalty, courage and willpower worthy of celebration in an act of 'visionary expansion of the categories of value' that Jeffrey C. Robinson associates with Fancy:

Creating occurs in the presence of dying; as the speaker expires the world fills her breath upon which language is inscribed. The poet at once conserved the expiring life and praises it. A poetics of expiration—the asymptotic approach of death, silence, substancelessness, oblivion—calls forth at the last possible moment a resistance to this fast tendency, a lingering, characteristic of the consciousness poetry seems to urge, out of which comes a complete reversal or conversion, in form, coherence, song, and praise.<sup>20</sup>

In her emphasis on moments of death in *Records of Woman*, Hemans defies the finality of the historical records she retells by celebrating the spirituality of strong will. In her didactic emphasis on emulating action, she defines and advocates the development of qualities that resist societal constructions of the 'intensely feminine'.

In this respect, 'The Switzer's Wife' holds an unusual position in *Records of Woman* because the wife, described by Hemans as 'a woman who seems to have been of an heroic spirit', accomplishes what no other women in *Records* can; upon recognising the danger to her family's safety, 'the free Alpine spirit woke at last'.<sup>21</sup> In the succeeding stanzas, Hemans demonstrates the ability of the free spirit to wield great power as she motivates her husband to cast aside his melancholy and fight. Hemans distinguishes the Switzer's wife from the many other women in *Records* who cling desperately to their men in war and death, hoping to prevent physical and eternal separation. On the other hand, the Switzer's wife commands her husband to 'Go forth beside the waters [...] God shall be with thee, my below'd!—Away! | Bless but thy child, and leave me,—I can pray!' (ll. 91, 95–96). In this exhortation, the poet emphasises the power of independence in the woman who sustains herself in her husband's absence. The self-sufficiency of the Switzer's wife causes her to act and makes her the most successful of the women in *Records*. Thanks to Hemans's introduction, we know that the wife's story ends in victory for Switzerland. Furthermore, we know from Hemans's reference to M. J. Jewsbury that 'yet around her is a light | Of inward majesty and might'.<sup>22</sup> The spiritual sufficiency of the Switzer's wife reveals self-reliance capable of sustaining



separation that surpasses her domestic position. As the only poem in *Records of Woman* that cannot be considered a dying-tale of sorts, 'The Switzer's Wife' illuminates the positive results of ethical action and independence that can guide us through the didactic implications of the remaining *Records*. As Wolfson notes, Hemans 'imagine[s] women who won't suffer fate but rebel, and in forms that perversely parody domestic affection'.<sup>23</sup> Under the guise of 'domestic affection' and other 'womanly' qualities such as elegance and tenderness, through *Records of Woman*, her own version of Cary's dying-tale, Hemans develops several strategies to teach her audience, in particular young women, a self-determination that defies gendered stereotypes and fosters egalitarianism.

The didactic value of the dying-tale relies on the process of its being heard in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, as well as in *Records of Woman*. Herod, knowing Mariam's fate and anticipating Nuntio's tone, must still listen to the details of the story as a gesture toward his responsibility for the tragedy. The scenario itself unveils the limitations of the visual; upon seeing Nuntio, Herod tellingly exclaims:

Oh, do not with thy words my life destroy,  
I prithee tell no dying-tale: thine eye  
Without thy tongue doth tell but too too much:  
Yet let thy tongue's addition make me die,  
Death welcome comes to him whose grief is such. (v. 2. 16–20)

In this passage, Herod visually ascertains the weight of Nuntio's message, while acknowledging that hearing the tale will crush him. The act of listening supersedes the act of seeing. For Romantic epistemologists, the practice of empiricism led to a deepened consciousness of the benefits and dangers of the various senses. In *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (1993), William Galperin discusses how literature complicates the consciousness of the 'tyranny of conception' in Romantic literature primarily because of the idea that the tyranny stems from 'the invisible nature of man' rather than the physical capability of sight. While critics such as Norman Bryson and Julia Kristeva have articulated the colonising and patriarchal dangers of this tyranny, Galperin goes on to explain that, ironically, authors like Wordsworth and Coleridge find that 'only the eye can effect anything resembling an intervention to prohibit the tyranny of sight'.<sup>24</sup> As Wordsworth was seeking a solution for the problem of the visual objectification of landscape and people through 'the most despot of our senses',<sup>25</sup> Hemans herself develops a counter to the objectification of women and landscape through a multi-sensory, rather than visually dominant, approach to communication.

In *Records of Woman*, Hemans corrects an overemphasis on the visual by alerting the audience to the power of the other senses. Her especially auditory emphasis did not go unnoticed by critics like Byron, which, according to Diego Saglia, reveals that 'Byron points out and dismisses Hemans's investments in voice and utterance [...] [his] dismissal of Hemans is based on her use of the sonic and acoustic paradigm'.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps Byron's diminishment of the communicative power of the auditory reflects a common masculinist approach toward women's poetry; additionally, Saglia notes several other, Victorian critics who disliked

Hemans's sound devices.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, Hemans does more than simply infuse her poetry with auditory imagery: in some cases, sound meets the deep needs of the characters involved. For example, in 'Gertrude, or Fidelity till Death', Gertrude demonstrates the magnitude of her loyalty to her husband vocally:

The wind rose high,—but with it rose  
Her voice, that he might hear: [...]  
While she sat striving with despair  
Beside his tortured form,  
And pouring her deep soul in prayer  
Forth on the rushing storm.<sup>28</sup>

In this stanza, sound conducts the deep communication of the soul, and Hemans emphasises Gertrude's strength by revealing that her voice competes with the wind. This intimacy contrasts with the association of the visual and distance near the poem's beginning when Hemans describes the heaven's 'pale stars watching to behold | The might of earthly love' during a 'clear and cold' night (ll. 5–8). Though nothing exists to obscure the visual communication between heaven and the lovers on earth, words like 'pale' and 'cold' foster the idea of an unfeeling observer taking in a scene full of intense physical communication. Ultimately, Gertrude overcomes the miseries of her husband's last minutes with her touch and kisses; Hemans juxtaposes her tactile imagery with her reference to the transcendent: 'Oh! lovely are ye, Love and Faith, | Enduring to the last!' (ll. 49–50) While Jacqueline Labbe reads this moment as a representation of the failure of the romance, I suggest instead that the moment is one of overcoming the limitations of the physically conventional with intentionality, using auditory and tactile communications imbued with transcendental significance.<sup>29</sup>

In many ways, Hemans's use of sound overcomes the diminishment of the feminine through visual dominance because of sound's enduring relationship to place. Saglia observes that her 'poetry works to define a potentially strong subjectivity which, however, is either on the brink of dissolution or already beyond rescue yet is also intricately bound up with ideological frameworks, temporal markers, and geo-cultural coordinates'.<sup>30</sup> Hemans presents place as having the unique quality of longevity, as opposed to human temporality, yet place somehow offers us the record of the finite human experience. For example, 'Imelda' begins with the musical narrative power of nature:

We have the myrtle's breath around us here,  
Amidst the fallen pillars;—this hath been  
Some Naiad's fane of old. How brightly clear,  
Flinging a vein of silver o'er the scene,  
Up thro' the shadowy grass, the fountain wells,  
And music with it, gushing from beneath  
The ivied altar!—that sweet murmur tells  
The rich wildflowers no tale of woe or death.<sup>31</sup>

In this stanza, Hemans constructs situational irony by toying with the idea of preservation. The myrtle's breath preserves, in a sense, the naiad's former presence

by the spring; the fountain's gushing creates music. While the landscape does not directly tell the violent story of Imelda and Azzo, Hemans does subtly suggest the idea of the landscape as witness and preserver of the lovers' vows:

[...] They stood, that hour,  
Speaking of hope, while tree, and fount, and flower,  
And star, just gleaming thro' the cypress boughs,  
Seem'd holy things, as records of their vows. (ll. 25–28)

Though the trees themselves do not repeat the vows back to the audience, they function as a conduit of preserved memory. Hemans continues to play with the idea of memory preserved and lost as Imelda searches for Azzo:

[...] a shuddering thrill  
Ran thro' each vein, when first the Naiad's rill  
Met her with melody—sweet sounds and low;  
*We* hear them yet, they live along its flow—  
*Her* voice is music lost! (ll. 69–73; original emphases)

Rather than alerting her audience to the inability of the landscape to preserve Imelda's sorrow, Hemans instead emphasises that the sounds of the past live in the present landscape, that we are the ones who hear and interpret. The narrator of 'Imelda' performs this very function by offering guidance in recognising the romanticised history of place, imbued in nature's sounds, while simultaneously reconstructing a tragic moment for the reader's benefit. Imelda becomes a kind of naiad herself, as the presence of her spirit permanently indwells the riverside thanks to the poetic preservation of her story. Likewise, 'Edith, a Tale of the Woods' reveals the necessity that nature preserve the human experience: 'Awful it is for human heart to bear | The might and burden of the solitude!'<sup>32</sup> The physicality and temporality of humanity makes it insufficient to harbour the weight of the collective human experience, so Hemans leaves the history 'Unto the forest oaks' (l. 19). This emphasis on human insufficiency democratises the human experience as fragile and as fleeting as sound itself, favouring neither male nor female.

By technically and ideologically developing the auditory elements of her poetry, Hemans trains her audience to receive her dying-tales. Instead of consoling humanity merely with the knowledge that the story of human experience can surpass the corporeal, she demonstrates that the hearing of these tales produces a satisfying depth of spirituality. In a brief discussion of 'Mozart's Requiem', Saglia notes that

[m]usic [...] is an act of spiritual devotion, a spiritual investment clothed in, and conveyed by, music—the most immaterial of the arts [...] Music and, in metapoetic terms, the acoustic provide the kind of middle ground necessary for Hemans to create poetry that straddles the human and the divine.<sup>33</sup>

Hemans clearly articulates this relationship in 'Edith', where, from the beginning, the sounds of nature suggest the ability of the earth to carry the weight of human emotion. After the poetic narrative has introduced the details of Edith's solitary agony, the narrative voice offers a particularly enlightening apostrophe:

[...] Oh Love and Death!  
 Ye have sad meetings on this changeful earth,  
 Many and sad! but airs of heavenly breath  
 Shall melt the links which bind you, for your birth  
 Is far apart. (ll. 49–53)

The spatial description of the births of love and death suggest that, on earth, they share a temporary and unnatural union. Ultimately, the power that will dissolve the links binding this union comes from 'airs of heavenly breath'. Edith herself demonstrates this power at work; as her life fades away, her voice merges with the summer breeze:

[...] Nor in vain  
 Was that soft-breathing influence to enchain  
 The soul in gentle bonds: by slow degrees  
 Light follow'd on, as when a summer breeze  
 Parts the deep masses of the forest shade  
 And lets the sunbeam through:—Her voice was made  
 Ev'n such a breeze; and she, a lowly guide,  
 By faith and sorrow rais'd and purified,  
 So to the Cross her Indian fosterers led,  
 Until their prayers were one. (ll. 126–35)

Edith's passionate pursuit of the souls of her foster parents combines nature's voice with the articulation of her spirituality; she appropriately sings mournful hymns at twilight when each element is most compelling (ll. 118–21). In these two passages, Hemans sets up corresponding unities: the more Edith's voice becomes nature's breeze, the closer she and her foster parents grow unified in prayer, to the point where Edith, having accomplished her purpose, can transcend the unnatural bondage between love and death. Edith almost imperceptibly dies as her foster father, now purified by his entrance into unity with Edith's natural spirituality, sings a passing song. The poem's speaker concludes: 'The song had ceas'd—the listeners caught no breath, | That lovely sleep had melted into death.' (ll. 230–31) Whereas, typically, the finality of the word 'death' might suggest a kind of negative separation, within this context, the word provides resolution with a positive separation. Aided by song, Edith's physical passing literally accomplishes the melting of the bonds between love and death foreshadowed earlier in the poem by restoring them their appropriate status as distinguishable entities. The music enables the gracefulness of Edith's passing by preserving her spiritual legacy, which itself is developed through the musicality of language and spirituality. As Robinson observes, Hemans's poetics find 'a way of temporarily solving the tension between the call of holiness and the call of poetry'.<sup>34</sup>

Saglia's brief observation about the immateriality of music provides the key to Hemans's strategic, democratising use of sound. For her, spiritual devotion does necessitate empirical engagement, but she recognises the dangers of a visually dominant empirical practice, particularly in its tendency to foster a despotism that benefits from viewing women as intellectually disadvantaged. As a result, Hemans



reminds her readers that empiricism requires attention to every sensory experience rather than merely the visual. Susan Levins reflects similarly on Dorothy Wordsworth: 'Her writing thus expresses an equipoise of self and the phenomenal world that challenges the inwardness projected on to the world and the notion of assertive self advanced by so many male writers of the romantic world'.<sup>35</sup> By viewing epistemology as organic and personal rather than restricted by objective linearity, Hemans creates in her *Records of Woman* a forward momentum reflective of the ethics of action. In her own comments on the relationship of the self and epistemology, Matchinske recalls Cleanth Brooks, who advocates that we 'speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of [historical] narrative, the master trope of its strange logic'.<sup>36</sup> To employ the anticipation of retrospection in the study of Hemans frees us to understand her awareness of her didactic legacy, both in its effectiveness and in its malleability.

Hemans infuses her poetry with didactic power through her epistemic extension to the auditory, yet this epistemic move takes part in a much broader deliberate movement on Hemans's part to shape the interpretation and conference of history. Hemans openly participates in a philosophical discussion over the nature of historical recordkeeping in the way that she frequently positions her poems in *Records of Woman* to follow a prose account of the original historical situation. Juxtaposed historical records speak to a modern conceptualisation of history. As Matchinske aptly points out:

We require at least two separate versions of what has happened to recognize history as history. Whenever we write new narratives we are constructing stories that are at odds with or in contrast to something that has preceded them. We are responding to explicit or imagined counter-histories. This means we are also always dealing with the matter of multiple truths.<sup>37</sup>

In some cases, historians strategically rely on the separate versions Matchinske describes in order to defend their objective conclusions regarding the truth of history. However, as historians continue the pursuit of preserving the past, the multiplicity of narratives confounds rather than ensures objectivity. Hemans reveals a sensitive awareness of historicity in her construction of *Records of Woman*: pairing the poems with their corresponding prose accounts lends an aura of accuracy to the poems themselves, as though satisfying our need to confirm the facts before subscribing wholeheartedly to the poems' rhetoric. Likewise, Hemans chooses to combine distantly removed historical figures such as Joan of Arc, Arabella Stuart, Edith and the Greek bride into the *Records*, a narrative sequence with recurrent patterns of youth, love and death that require ideological fashioning either correspondingly or antithetically to Hemans's women.

Furthermore, Hemans also situates herself in the discussion of the nature of the historical record by critiquing the idea of objective history through a revelation of the insufficiency and instability of memory in 'Arabella Stuart'. Hemans metaphorically sets up Arabella as the first in *Records* to illustrate the impossibil-

ity of an accurate interpretation of events. Before the poem begins, Hemans cites Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature* (1791–1823):

What passed in that dreadful imprisonment, cannot perhaps be recovered for authentic history,—but enough is known; that her mind grew impaired, that she finally lost her reason, and, if the duration of her imprisonment was short, that it was only terminated by her death.<sup>38</sup>

Hemans's use of the verbal 'known' in this passage introduces an idea that she will continue by using Arabella's own words. Here, 'known' simultaneously justifies Hemans's Romantic elaboration of Arabella's thoughts and calls into question the stability of their authenticity. Duncan Wu's footnote on Hemans's introduction wonderfully extends her irony: 'In Hemans's time it was thought that Stuart went mad in prison, but today it is believed that she remained sane and was party to several escape plots'.<sup>39</sup> While Hemans may not have foreseen the abandonment of the theory of mental debilitation that fuelled the emotion of her poem, she likely would have approved of its further destabilisation of the historical record. In Hemans's version of the beginning of Arabella's captivity, Arabella states confidently: 'I know, I know our love | Shall yet call gentle angels from above | By its undying fervour; and prevail' (ll. 34–36). The repetition of the phrase 'I know' asserts Arabella's absolute confidence in her epistemology, which Hemans's audience recognises as doomed from the beginning.

Later in the poem, Hemans complicates Arabella's epistemic assertion: 'Thou hast forsaken me! I feel, I know, | There would be rescue if this were not so' (ll. 187–88). Perhaps with less confidence, Arabella asserts her knowledge, this time a reversal of her previous avowal. Whereas she first combines faith with fact in full confidence of her reunification with Seymour, she now attempts a somewhat different combination of feeling and certainty. In a way, Arabella's grasp at feelings concludes her confidence in knowledge; as the poem continues, she recognises her mind's instability when she begs heaven to 'controul | These thoughts' and finds in her soul 'fierce forms crowding it' (ll. 207–10). Hemans's destabilisation of knowledge prepares her audience for a significant conclusion based on Arabella's tragic story: not only does memory fail at preserving the past, but it also fails to carry the present. Just as Arabella's memories of Seymour cannot sustain her prolonged imprisonment, memory in general, as representative of history, cannot accomplish the action necessary for positive change. Hemans's first poem in *Records of Woman* functions allegorically as a warning to her readers, who must shape, renew and refashion historical memory to avoid the degeneration inherent in the attempt to preserve it.

In its own articulation of failed preservation, Cary's dying-tale plays with the impossible desire to retrieve physical bodies as the original source of historical memory. In a pitiful, arguably ridiculous response to Nuntio's assertion that Mariam's 'body is divided from her head', Herod wonders: 'Why, yet methinks there might be found by art | Strange ways of cure; 'tis sure rare things are done | By an inventive head, and willing heart' (*Mariam*, v. 2. 91–93).

Of course, no reasonable cure for decapitation exists; however, Herod's despair causes him to vocalise hopes of reanimation. Later in his conversation with Nuntio, Herod synecdochically fixates on Mariam's hands as representation of the sweetness and beauty that should have prevented her execution. As Nuntio recalls Mariam's resolve in the face of death, he preserves for Herod a historical record unsatisfying because it cannot reproduce Mariam's physical body. Hemans also delves deeply into this problem of representation. As Elliot explains:

These elegiac musings on the emptied and refigured images lead naturally to a concern with immortality, particularly the failure of the individual to continue after death. The conspicuous sense of loss and absence in the poems displays the anxiety surrounding an afterlife dependent on material representation.<sup>40</sup>

However, Hemans, like Cary, does not problematise the representation of the past merely to muse on what might have been. Instead, Cary's dying-tale provokes Herod to repentance and thus changes history, as suggested by Herod's new epitaph, which promotes social justice for the devastation inflicted by a patriarchal system: 'Here Herod lies, that hath his Mariam slain' (v. i. 258). Likewise, Hemans's *Records of Woman* provokes her audience to pursue a new and infinitely more useful record that promotes social justice by avoiding the linear objectivism of masculine epistemology and democratising approaches to the creation of knowledge. Just as Herod knows how Nuntio's dying-tale will end, we know how the *Records* end, yet Hemans offers us the ability to remake the future.

Hemans demands collective action from her audience, but rather than requiring their individual martyrdom, she weaves the performativity of martyrdom throughout her *Records* to sacrifice the women of the past for the sake of the women of the present. Through their tragic deaths, her women shatter the injurious intellectual-emotional binary, so often applied to Hemans herself, with dauntless willpower. As Wolfson argues, '[a] heightened consciousness of the fatal binding of female freedom and female death informs the implicit historiography of *Records of Woman*.'<sup>41</sup> Wolfson does not label these necessary deaths as martyrdom, and perhaps she does Hemans some disservice to women like Eudora,<sup>42</sup> who, according to Wolfson, dramatises female liberation:


[N]othing is more typical of Hemans than the death sentence on this symbolic drama and its seeming female apotheosis. The pattern of Staël's *Corrine* (female genius must die unhappy) was not just a cultural fad; it was Hemans's inner 'feminine' calculus: the more rebellious a woman, the more vivid the aesthetic fireworks, the more necessary her death.

This reading restricts the rhetorical effectiveness of poems like 'The Bride of the Greek Isle', creating instead tragic exempla of society's rejection of female genius and reinforcing their 'impotent defiance'.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that these women will themselves to die.

Eudora's martyrdom combats the enslaving commodification of women with a will that cannot be contained by human constraint. Arabella prays for death to

end an existence without the intellectual capacity to think freely and rationally. Imelda chooses death rather than a life subjected to the petty jealousies and rivalries enforced on her family by her male relatives. Pauline sacrifices herself for a daughter's life that she privileges above her own.<sup>44</sup> Hemans's women do not mistakenly or powerlessly lose their lives. Instead, they claim the ultimate self-determination by trading their bodily existence, which Hemans consistently represents as transient and violently susceptible to death, for the memorialisation of the human will. As such, Matchinske's *Women Writing History in Early Modern England* articulates a historical praxis that we must not forget:

history lessons are never rote or purely mimetic [...] What we learn from history is multiple and contingent, having more to do with finding a way to ask questions about human responsibility, about what we want our lives to mean, than actually discovering how to accomplish those ends via some sort of analogic experience.<sup>45</sup>

Elizabeth Cary and Felicia Hemans preserve affective histories of female martyrdom, not for the sake of historical accuracy, but in order that their dying-tales will enable their audiences to shape their futures. 

## NOTES

1. Elisa Beshero-Bondar, 'Affective Historiography in Poetry: Women and Time in Romantic Epic', in *Women, Epic, and Transition in British Romanticism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), p. 21.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
3. Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'Memorials of the Female Mind: Creating the Canon of Women's Literature in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 107–08.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 111–12.
5. Frederic Rowton, *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (Philadelphia: Baird, 1853), p. 386.
6. Cited in Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 44.
7. Greg Kucich, 'The History Girls: Charlotte Smith's *History of England* and the Politics of Women's Educational History', in *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1770–1845*, ed. by Porscha Fermanis and John Regan (Oxford: OUP, 2014), p. 45.
8. Megan Matchinske, *Women Writing History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p. 157.
9. Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry*, Renaissance Texts and Studies (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), v. 1. 17–18. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.
10. Matchinske, *Women Writing History*, p. 137.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
14. Brian P. Elliot, "Nothing beside remains": Empty Icons and Elegiac Ekphrasis in Felicia Hemans', *Studies in Romanticism*, 51 (2012), 25–40 (p. 27) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2012.0039>>.



15. Ibid., p. 27; Lundeen and Elliot emphasise that, in contrast with Keats's praise of artistic detachment or 'negative capability', Hemans instead persists in collapsing the distance between herself and her poetry.
16. In 1818, after six years of marriage, Irish army Captain Alfred Hemans left Felicia to care for their five sons. They separated the following year.
17. Matchinske, *Women Writing History*, p. 156.
18. Michael T. Williamson, 'Impure Affections: Felicia Hemans's Elegiac Poetry and Contaminated Grief', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 19–35 (p. 20).
19. Ibid., p. 33.
20. Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 167–91.
21. Felicia Hemans, 'The Switzer's Wife', in *Records of Woman with Other Poems*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1999), p. 25, l. 66. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.
22. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 25.
23. Wolfson, *Borderlines*, p. 58.
24. William Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 26.
25. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 212.
26. Diego Saglia, "A Deeper and Richer Music": The Poetics of Sound and Voice in Felicia Hemans's 1820s Poetry', *English Literary History*, 74 (2007), 351–70 (p. 367) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2007.0018>>.
27. Ibid., p. 370.
28. Felicia Hemans, 'Gertrude, or Fidelity till Death', in *Records of Woman*, ed. by Feldman, pp. 34–35, ll. 33–40. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
29. Jacqueline M. Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox: Love, Violence and the Uses of Romance, 1760–1830* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 131.
30. Saglia, "A Deeper and Richer Music", p. 357.
31. Felicia Hemans, 'Imelda', in *Records of Woman*, ed. by Feldman, pp. 35–36, ll. 1–8. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
32. Felicia Hemans, 'Edith, a Tale of the Woods', in *Records of Woman*, ed. by Feldman, p. 39, ll. 7–8. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
33. Saglia, "A Deeper and Richer Music", p. 366.
34. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry*, p. 188.
35. Cited in Haefner, Joel, '(De)Forming the Romantic Canon: The Case of Women Writers', *College Literature*, 20.2 (1993), 44–57 (p. 49).
36. Cited in Matchinske, *Women Writing History*, p. 156.
37. Ibid., p. 150.
38. Cited in Hemans, 'Arabella Stuart', in *Records of Woman*, ed. by Feldman, pp. 7–8. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
39. Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 1250.
40. Elliot, "Nothing beside remains", p. 26.
41. Wolfson, *Borderlines*, p. 60.

42. Eudora was a Greek maiden whose wedding to Ianthis is interrupted by raiding pirates. Ianthis is killed and Eudora captured. To free herself from captivity, she sets fire to the ship and burns along with it.
43. Wolfson, *Borderlines*, p. 67.
44. Pauline's daughter Bertha dances in riverside festivities when fire breaks out. When she sees Bertha's body in flames, Pauline rushes to her daughter and perishes alongside Bertha.
45. Matchinske, *Women Writing History*, p. 151.

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